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The Whiteface and the Auguste: *The Integration of Structure and Spontaneity in contemporary clown theatre performance***.**

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PLAGIARISM DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: Date:

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation proffers argument which attempts to suggest that the consideration of both spontaneity and structure is paramount in the creation, rehearsal and performance of clown theatre. In my view, the Whiteface and Auguste clown partnership arguably represents a break in the tradition of circus clowns towards a more modern way of understanding and thinking about clowning informed by ideas around spontaneity and structure. The characteristics of their partnership are examined as possibly containing valuable insights around these concepts which may enhance our understanding of clown theatre.

The dissertation is divided into three chapters. The first relies on theoretical enquiry informing my ideas around definitions and the history of the Whiteface and Auguste clowns. In the second chapter I discuss rehearsing and training for clown theatre where I engage with the contrasting clown methodologies of two practitioners, Phillipe Gaulier and Ira Seidenstein, whose clown courses I attended and whose notions I use as the framework informing my research. In the third chapter my research methodology relies heavily on practice as research conducted through three different practical projects over the two year research period.

Through practical and theoretical research, the study clarifies the predominance of the Auguste clown as a way of understanding modern clowning. It aims to illuminate the way in which clowning is detrimentally emphasised as a purely spontaneous form, avoiding critical examination, and how this understanding of the clown results in an emphasis on spontaneity and games in the teaching and learning of clowning. The study argues for the significance of the Whiteface clown with regards to order, form, rules, preparation and critical enquiry. These findings both in practice and theory have provided clarity and a strong theoretical foundation from which I can attempt to create and perform in clown theatre performances where there is possibly a balance of qualities representing both the Auguste and the Whiteface figures: both structure and spontaneity.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This dissertation attempts to function as a platform from which it may be demonstrated how, by examining the successful partnering and other attributes of the traditional Whiteface and Auguste clowns, valuable characteristics of clown performance in relation to theatre may be elicited. The history and intriguing relationship between the Whiteface and Auguste clowns will be used as an overarching metaphor to argue and present how in clowning, structure and spontaneity should be simultaneously considered to construct interesting clown performances. The Whiteface clown arguably representing ideas around structure, order, rules and preparation and the Auguste clown, on the other hand, encapsulating notions of spontaneity, disruption, impulse and playfulness. The process of making connections between structure and spontaneity begins with the inclination to write about, theorise and historicise the art of clowning as the discipline overtly resists and opposes a cognitive understanding in favour of a more spontaneous embodied practice. Therefore, I will initiate my argument by introducing the exacting relationship between theory and practice that underpins the structure of my research.

> Clowning is minimally represented in critical literature and, as an art form, has almost no academic foundation. Clowns locate traditions of their craft that exist exclusively in custom and practice, and then adapt those traditions according to their own impulses. […] Does the absence of academic or text-based models offer license and freedom to its practitioners in their continued pursuit in the art? Or, alternatively, is clowning shackled by modes of thought and behaviour that are more restricted than other artistic disciplines, owing to a lack of critical examination? (LeBank & Bridal, 2015: 8-9)

Before I begin my discussion, I anticipate that it would be valuable for me to contextualise this topic and research within the particular parameters of the Masters degree in the Drama department of the University of Cape Town. As, the research structure provided by the university is an important element that both defines and limits the borders of my research territory. The resources and platforms provided by the UCT Drama department encourage students taking this course to 'create, produce and manage' their own work in the theatre realm, whether it be as directors, writers or performers. This is reflected in the three performance projects that form part of the two-year degree. Equal emphasis is assigned to the engagement of students in finding an appropriate theoretical language to reflect their practical work, experiences and ideas by writing and presenting seminar papers. I start with the challenging relationship between theory and practice as it is not only a constant and often-repeated theme in the enigmatic practice of theatre and performance, but it seems to be a conflicting aspect of clowning itself. Mary Zimmerman writes that:

> To create theatrical performances and to write and think about performance theory feel like very different processes. Although it may be argued that the performance practitioner and theorist are equally embedded in time and circumstance and equally informed by political or psychological influences, nevertheless the physical differences between writing and rehearsing are great. Writing about and contemplating the intricate complexities of post-structuralism requires solitude, whereas the actual practice of making performance is furiously opposed to such solitude. Performance is the antithesis of privacy. It is chaotic, riotous; it provides very few moments for reflection, time seems to charge away uncontrollably towards the opening night. (Zimmerman cited in Danzig, 2007: 30-31)

The "chaotic" and "riotous" nature of performance seems amplified in the world of clowning with its internal resistance to repetition and consistency. Therefore, writing and making sense of the clown's processes of creating material is, I argue, a necessary albeit challenging process, especially considering the booming interest in clowning from a theatrical perspective. Returning to the solitude of writing, managing and sustaining this 'often

troubled' relationship has been one of the greatest challenges for me (and for so many other clowns it seems) as clowning is specifically renowned for opposing analytical thought and historical investigation. Yet surprisingly, the practical field and investigation into the sphere of clowning is continuously growing and it is for this reason that I deem it valuable to take on the challenge of connecting practice to academic analysis. Many seminar discussions were spent probing and finding solutions around documenting, theorising and reflecting the often-elusive nature of clowning as a practice. Jon Davison, an eminent clown performer, teacher and co-founder of the school, *Escola de Clown de Barcelona,* deems it necessary and advantageous to commit to finding coherent structure of thought within the amorphous world of clowning and states that, "the view of clowning as a highly structured and ordered activity is a vey fruitful one" (2013:7) but that it is a popular "post 1968" notion that :

> [W]e are all better off since we did away with those nasty texts, authors and anything that admits to be thought out beforehand, and ushered into a new era of spontaneity, improvisation and authenticity. (Davison, 2013:7)

In the above statement, Davison makes the significant connection between spontaneity and authenticity that contributes to the reason why a more structured view of clowning has often been negated. It is an established notion, upheld by renowned practitioners such as Phillipe Gaulier, that the clown's most definitive aspect is the desire to practice with a sense of freedom and an absolute awareness and openness to the present moment in order to react and engage authentically. Davison questions the "privileged position" of clowning as a purely spontaneous form as it has become a proverbial way of thinking that "ousts all other ways of experiencing clowning" (2013:7). I will return to this later when analysing the way in which clowning is often taught, avoiding cognitive analysis at all cost in favour of experience.

In this study I attempt to argue, that although the predominant view of clowning as a purely spontaneous form has merit, this spontaneity is impossible to maintain when clowning is connected in any way to the theatre. Through an examination of the successful partnership of the Whiteface and Auguste clowns, I suggest that the essence and characteristics of each persona (Whiteface/structure and Auguste/spontaneity) need to be simultaneously present in any clown theatre performance. This does not necessarily mean they need to be present as two separate clowns, but within the performance, carefully structured, both personae must co-exist in some form. Before I begin this argument, I shall spend some time clarifying some particularities of clowning and clown theatre.

Clown Theatre

The deceptively simple term ‘clown theatre’ has recently gained recognition as a popular umbrella term for clowns who perform in the theatre. Although the term clown theatre attempts to eradicate boundaries between two previously divided disciplines, it might be found to be as misleading as the term clowning itself. The reason being that the broad individual terms ‘theatre’ and ‘clowning’ have long been debated and have been impossible to pin down as fixed. As Danzig articulates:

> At first glance, a definition of clown-theater is simple. It is, as its name suggests, a combination of clown and theater. But to go any further “clown” and “theater” need clarification, thereby complicating the endeavor. Each term is unwieldy. Moving towards a definition of clown is a chapter in and of itself, and the term theater, of course, gives rise to an almost infinite number of approaches and definitions. Generally speaking, clown-theater incorporates elements from both clown and theater (2007:18).

Therefore, as an explication that encompasses the full term ‘clown theatre’ is impractical and unnecessary considering the scope of this dissertation, I shall attempt to demarcate my understanding of the field of clowning within theatre that I have been surveying in the past two years in order to make my argument. Bailes points us to the “problem of needing to generate an appropriate vocabulary in order to articulate the emergence of new kinds of performance that skate across disciplinary divisions and formal boundaries” (2011:18). For Weitz,

> Clowns and clowning refer to a broad range of such laughter-centric applications across cultures and through time, including ritual figures and officially sanctioned mockery as well as performance strategies for social critique and political intervention. (2012:79)

The above quote, like countless other definitions of clowning, is wide and evasive and provides an idea of the range of possibilities that may fall under the term clowning. Clowning

as a form of performance is an infinitely vast and growing territory that conjures up deeply personal associations, reactions and ideas of what it entails. Therefore, although clowning has become an important and popular course taught at universities worldwide, along with other courses such as mime, commedia del'arte and melodrama, the theory around the practice is still limited and it would be valuable to grant some time to define the parameters of the increasingly popular practice, or as Peacock suggests, "fix some landmarks in a relatively unchartered territory" (2009:19).

Texts about clowning often begin with the author taking some time to either attempt to define clowning or alternatively discuss the impossibility of a concrete definition of what this variegated practice involves. One of the aspects that contributes to the difficulty of assigning a precise definition to the word clowning, is the fact that as it stretches across disciplines and contexts the definition changes, slightly or overtly.

> [We often] have preconceptions of what clown means, how a clown dresses, how a clown behaves, and what a clown performance might be like. These preconceptions are rooted in early encounters with clowns through the popular Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey three-ring circus, Bozo the Clown, the Ronald McDonald clown, shopping malls, and birthday parties. (Danzig, 2007:63)

The expectations and requirements of what a clown performance entails differ radically from one context to another and the space and application of the particular performance determines the clown action. In the circus space for instance, clowns traditionally perform small *entrées* and the focus is on a short spectacle, with an emphasis on the visual impact, which usually takes place in between main acts to entertain audience members while sets are being shifted. Their aim is to distract and make the audience laugh through surprise and trickery. Circus clowns make use of skills such as acrobatics, walking on stilts and interacting with objects in a surprising way and usually require a certain level of professional skill.

In the hospital space, clown groups such as the *Big Apple Circus Care Unit* in the United States and the international NGO, *Clowns without Borders,* "offer laughter to relieve the suffering of all persons, especially children, who live in areas of crisis including refugee camps, conflict zones and emergency situations" (Clowns Without Borders, 2015). Here the degree of skill varies and often volunteers do not need a high level of professional skill. Clowning more recently has also gained popularity through interest in workshops and groups similar to improvisation groups where the art of clowning is often taught as a form of self expression. Very often these workshops require no previous experience in a particular field and the course is usually based on the principle that everyone has an individual clown persona that can be 'found' and expressed. One example of such a course is Angela de Castro's 'How to be a stupid' course where participants range from beginners with little to no experience to experienced clowns.

Although boundaries may intersect and clowns working in the circus may also work in hospitals or theatres, the specific requirements differ radically. In this dissertation my research is exclusively focused on clowns performing in the theatre space and I look at what the theatre offers the clown in order for the clown to operate successfully within that space.[1] When I started my Masters degree, my main preoccupation oscillated around examining the space surrounding the clown. I had a hunch that the clown creates interesting performances, using and manipulating proxemics and spatial relations in the theatre and was interested in investigating how the theatre space specifically contributed to clowning. Although my research focus has deviated considerably, the dynamics of spatial relations in the theatre, is still an important aspect that forms part of my research and it will be

[1] It is important to note that I am not setting up my argument to privilege the theatre space above any other space (circus/street/festivals), but rather, that within the specific theatre making course, I focus my study specifically on the theatre and on what it offers the clown.

examined from the perspective of the physical theatre structure and the consequent conventions and spacial dynamics the physical structure encourages. Peacock defines clown theatre as follows:

> *Clown Theatre* is theatre where all the performers are clowns and where the visual aesthetic is surreal or has elements of fantasy about it. The performance is not based on a script but will have been devised by the company in keeping with the skills and strengths of the performers. It may or may not involve the spoken word but there is likely to be close interaction between the performers and music or sound effects. Clown Theatre also tends to establish an interactive relationship between the performers and the audience that may involve the performers leaving the stage. (Peacock, 2009:30)

This definition is useful in identifying some key definitive characteristics of clown theatre. However, the predicted (and often encountered) danger involved in defining clowning or clown theatre too narrowly, is the consequence of cutting away bluntly in the hope of being left with clarity and understanding at the expense of some possibly valuable characteristics not being considered. For example, there are clown theatre productions that do not necessarily involve a surreal aesthetic and the performance may be based on a script, as with the Chicago-based company *500 Clown*. Similarly, it is often debated whether or not clowns have to be funny in order to be defined as clowns. Philippe Gaulier, insists that this is the primary function of the clown whether in the theatre or any other space: “The clown who does not provoke laughter is a shameful mime” (Gaulier, 2007:289). Eli Simon, on the other hand, disagrees stating that a clown does not have to be funny as long as he is “*truthful”* (2009:31, emphasis in original).

Therefore, providing a narrow and precise definition of the hybrid form ‘clown theatre’ is neither useful nor constructive, I would rather encourage a more fluid conception of the term.

I will begin by looking at the history of clown theatre, examining the consequences of the move from the circus to the theatre space, as well as investigating the beginning of the relationship between the Auguste and Whiteface theatre clowns.

History

Victor Vladimirov asserts that: "In order to have any movement forward in clowning you have to have a philosophy of clowning. In order to have a philosophy of clowning, you have to have a history of clowning" (Vladimirov, 1993 cited in Davison, 2013:18). Vladimirov insists that an understanding of the philosophy of clowning is embedded in an understanding of the clown's history. To gain access to, what clowns often deem as 'mystical processes' of generating material and performing, I turned to key moments in the history of clowning that might drive this analysis, but as I expected, this history is filled with debates, myths and obscurity. My starting point is the relationship between the Auguste and Whiteface clowns that came to fruition around the mid 1880s. Jon Davison's chapter, 'Birth of the Auguste' in his book *Clown* (2013:65-86) has proved seminal to my understanding of this section of clown history.

Davison recognises the recent prominence of the Auguste that has seeped into the manner in which clowning as a medium is understood and states that: "In its latest red nose aspect it [the Auguste] had come to signify 'clown' itself. Yet despite such iconic power, the auguste clown is a relatively recent phenomenon" (Davison, 2013:65). In this section I shall briefly discuss the frustratingly muddled history of the Auguste, muddled due to the fact that the Auguste as a figure appears to have resisted a logical or clear historic development on which we can all agree. It would seem that very few authors have been able to make sense of the history of the Auguste (using established facts) from the many myths inspired by the

figure. In my research I have found at least ten different legendary stories of how/where and when the first Auguste emerged, and although the legends have many similarities, the exact moment of the creation remains unclear. Davison claims that, "Rémy is virtually the only author to have attempted to dismantle the myths [of the first Auguste] rather than merely repeat them" (2013:65). He then further discusses Rémy's insight into why there have been so many different accounts of the birth of the Auguste yet so little factual information.

> [T]he difficulty for the historian lies in the fact that no-one seems to have bothered about the issue when the auguste clown was becoming popular, nor by the point when practically all circuses had already copied the idea, at the end of the 1880s. At the time, the critics did not think the matter to be worthy of serious study. (Davison, 2013:66)

In my view, the issue around the Auguste's birth that "no one seems to have bothered about" is of paramount importance as the demand for a new clown grew out of the desire for a counterpart for the Whiteface. Townsen, author of *Clowns,* renders his view on why the Auguste was born:

> The British clown in the circus, and pantomime, […] began as a simpleton, a clod, a country bumpkin. During the course of the nineteenth century, however, his increasing aggressiveness and knavery gradually came to symbolize a sort of cunning wisdom […]. There was then a genuine need for a new stupidus in the circus, one who could fill the void created when the traditional whiteface clown evolved into a knave and jester. (1976:207-208)

The simpleton became a calculated trickster and there was a longing for spontaneity and freedom which opened a perfect gap for a much-celebrated partner to the rule and convention-based Whiteface, a partner offering exactly such spontaneity and freedom. However, the many tales of the birth of the Auguste have a number of common features; particularly, that it was spontaneous, unplanned and occurred one night as an accident.

Whether it was an "accident", an "act of rebellion" from Belling, dressed absurdly as a dare from a friend, or the drunken negligence of the horse grooms, "one was tall and thin; the

other small and fat" swopping costumes in a rush, as told by Gaulier and repeated by many, the underlying idea of spontaneity, fun and absurdism remains a prominent theme with respect to the Auguste (Gaulier, 2007:264). Someone had appeared in the circus ring one night doing something out of the ordinary, something they were not supposed to do, that was not rehearsed, and it was so funny, that he was ordered to come back the following night to do the same. More interesting than the different anecdotes is the desire for clowns to present their origins as a myth of accident and chaos.

What is however problematic about venerating the accidental and spontaneous birth of the Auguste to such a degree is that it remains at the core of, and implicit to, the method of clowning, when there has been no evidence that this is what made the Auguste a success. "Rémy's scepticism centres on the supposedly spontaneous nature of the birth of the auguste. More likely, he considers that Belling was performing as a clown under a pseudonym, and that the events were due to chance" (Davison, 2013:67-68). Davison goes on to explain that even the term Auguste, which Townsen mentions is "Berlin slang for silly or stupid" (Townsen, 1976:208), and was supposedly chanted by the crowd the day the first Auguste entered the ring, is questionable as some argue it did not exist until after the character became popular (Davison, 2013:68). Therefore, my intention is not to deny the possibility that the Auguste may have been born by chance turned to a stroke of luck which then transformed the world of clowning, but to explain that the history gives us some insight into the imaginary, unstructured, ill-recorded nature of the birth of the Auguste, which I argue may still disadvantage clown scholars today. Many believe, however, that it was the excellence of the Whiteface/Auguste relationship between Chocolat and Footit that finally led to the everlasting popularity of the Auguste clown.

"Thanks to Footit and Chocolat, by the 1890s comedy relied as much on the personalities and relationship of the clowns as on anything else" (Davison, 2013:72). Footit was born into the circus tradition, with his father running the "Great Allied Circus" (Peacock, 2009: 22) and he supposedly started performing at the age of three: "George Foottit, Jr. debuted in the ring at age three as a miniature version of his father's clown character, and learned under him his acrobatic repertoire" (Circopedia, n.d). Footit therefore seemed to have been destined to become one of the most famous Whiteface clowns by the 1880s. Whereas Chocolat's story, as a typical Auguste's story so often is, was anything but straightforward. Footit, (emblematic of the Auguste tradition of avoiding formal documentation) supposedly "declared not to have any legal document related to his identity" (Circopedia, n.d) and it was therefore only found out later that his birth name was Raphael Padilla. Chocolat was born into slavery in Cuba and was later sold to a wealthy household, from which he ran away. At the age of 16, Chocolat was employed by Tony Grice for whom he worked as a household servant (Davison, 2013:71). As a result of Chocolat's lack of skill and experience of the circus, he played the role as Auguste when he later started performing in the ring. Footit soon after employed Chocolat after he apparently spilt sauce on Mrs. Grice at their son's baptism (Davison, 2013:71). Chocolat and Footit became performing stars of the century. Davison explains: "Chocolat was the perfect opposite to Footit: slow, stoic, clumsy and stupid, versus Footit's intelligence, nervousness and lightness. Together they heralded a new era for the clown repertoire[…]" (Davison, 2013:71). Sadly, however, the triumph of the clowns relied solely on their success as a relationship and duo and when Chocolat and Footit split up, they were unable to maintain their status as successful clowns.

I have included the history of Footit and Chocolat, not only as they are the most famous clown duo, but to illustrate that the Auguste's popularity was due to, and relied on, the relationship between two clowns in which they were able to find the right chemistry as opposed to the Auguste's singular status as a clown. Once the Whiteface adapted his singular role to work as counterpart alongside the Auguste, it became difficult if not impossible for the clowns to work alone, especially for the Auguste who was trained to respond to the Whiteface clown and was never created to exist as an entity on its own. I believe, and will argue this point further in what follows here, that this relationship, and the essence captured in the two contrasting clown personae, provides us with an adequate scaffolding from which to further interrogate two essential aspects that make up clown theatre and should be kept in mind when training as a clown: structure and spontaneity.

CHAPTER TWO

Clown Theatre: Rehearsals and Training

Theatre, as a form of live performance, revolves around the collaboration of people working towards and constantly striving to build and create a series of events to be presented to the public at a prearranged moment in time. The rehearsal process of theatre practitioners involves continuous work for months or weeks to repeat events, actions, dialogue and ideas with a common goal in mind: to present a "slick façade" where the "labor" is concealed (Bailes, 2011:32). It is commonly accepted that any production involving live performance is a process where only the end result is revealed to an audience and that the preparation, rehearsal, planning and training processes are concealed. This is true for both theatre and clowning, and it is a common notion that in order to enhance the spectacle of performance, what happens backstage and before the opening night is hidden from spectators to enforce a sense of illusion and grandeur.

In this chapter, I shall discuss the difficulties of preparing for clown theatre focusing on the need for structure and spontaneity in training by looking at the differences between clown training and conventional theatre rehearsals and how these different construction methods may be combined to create clown theatre performances. I then look at my own experience of clown training particularly in relation to two contrasting clown courses, Phillipe Gaulier (2014) and Ira Seidenstein (2015), in which the essential elements of structure and spontaneity are captured through the rehearsal and training processes and methods used by the respective practitioners. I will begin by discussing clown training, which I argue is very different from preparing for conventional theatre performance. Secrecy and

exclusivity around clown training was highly important when traditional circuses reigned and Peacock explains how circuses,

> […] tend to be family run and to use performers who are either drawn from that family or from members of other circuses around the world. In this way, acts are passed on from generation to generation, and many performers, including the clowns, are skilled in more than one area of circus performance. Traditional circus programs include a range of acts, which can be divided into three categories: clown, physical skill and strength. […] Programs are designed in such a way that the setting and removal of equipment is often covered by the clowns, who distract the audience from technical and logistic requirements of the circus. (2009:43)

Peacock highlights some of the core characteristics of clowns in the circus. As clowns were required to master skills, and at the time there existed no official clown training institutions, training was usually received from previous generations of clowns and was generally a more individual, spontaneous and exclusive process. Clowns usually started training from a very early age as most clowns grew up in the circus environment. Furthermore, clowns were required to work constantly on mastering physical, acrobatic or other skills that could be included in a circus programme.

In theatre, however, a group of skilled theatre practitioners (actors, directors, designers and writers) collaborate together for a few months at a time before splitting up and working on a new project. This process is structured and regulated, working towards a certain number of performances. The rehearsal process is not about mastering certain skills but rather preparing the events to be repeated, by learning scripts, blocking and actions that need to be perfected for a repeatable performance.

It is my contention that in order to prepare for a contemporary clown theatre performance, the above methods need to be combined as there are two different features that require consideration: (1) The clown needs to create a repeatable and structured performance defined by stage conventions (a certain duration of performance time, the

stage, audience expectation); and (2) The clown still needs to maintain his clown status with regards to developing clown skills, audience interaction, playfulness, spontaneity and surprise, which although might have elements of structure, usually require more freedom and openness. Therefore, unlike circus or street performers who usually prepare short *entrées* – usually skills based - to be used interchangeably at certain intervals as part of the bigger spectacle of the circus or as the performer sees fit in the specific context of the street, the theatre clown must rehearse to create a sequence of events that can be repeated to make up a performance that will last a certain amount of time, this places consequent demands on keeping the performance interesting for a longer period of time and therefore clown theatre often relies on a narrative structure.

The clown additionally needs to work on mastering his/her clown persona and leave enough space for impulse driven and spontaneous interaction while maintaining the structure of the performance, which means that this skill needs to be practiced and developed. Therefore, the rehearsal/training for clowns working in the theatre requires there to be sufficient structure to sustain a long performance as well as enough time spent mastering and practicing being a clown with all the spontaneity and playfulness that this suggests.

Even though the UCT Masters course consists of a strong practical component with valuable resources to assist students in making performances (rehearsal space, theatres, students to perform in pieces, platforms for feedback and discussion), one of my biggest challenges was finding ways to rehearse as a clown in order to make, as well as perform in, my own theatre pieces. After endless futile rehearsals alone I realised that a clown struggles to work productively without the presence of an audience to react to. I was desperately seeking a technique to practice my own clowning while also needing to develop an adequate

structure to surround the clown so that I could perform a production. But these processes seemed very different – the latter demanding discipline, working with other people and in the structure of the theatre, and the former requiring a safe space and freedom in which I could practice clowning skills.

> Performances consist of the clowns' drive to play in the present moment of rehearsal, in which material is generated and crafted into actions to be repeated, and in the present moment of performance when those previously determined actions are played. Clearly, repeating the past-present of rehearsals is the common practice of theater-making; generating material specifically through presence in rehearsal and then interweaving it with the generation of material through presence of performance is a distinguishing feature of clown-theater. And of course material generated in the present-present of performances is repeated in subsequent performances. (Danzig 2007:153)

There are, therefore, three aspects to making clown theatre: (1) working on the skills of clowning by learning and practicing techniques such as timing, audience interaction and acrobatic skills; (2) turning the skills of the clown into a functioning format for a performance by generating enough material and structure; (3) rehearsing the material and events so as to be repeatable, meeting the production requirements of time, space and audience expectation. In this section I look at the first aspect: learning and practicing clowning skills.

I was privileged to attend two very contrasting clown courses during the period of my research from which I learnt valuable training methods. One of the major changes in traditional clowning, is the current notion that anyone can learn clown techniques. The focus of clowning has become less on acrobatic skills and more on the relationships between clowns and between clowns and the audience, and so the training of clowns has become an increasingly popular phenomenon.

> Thinking about clowning has arguably received a new impulse over the last half-century, coinciding with the development of contemporary clown teaching […]The new approach to clown of the last decades of the 20th century has been seen by some as revolutionary. One of its foundations was the notion that clown could be taught and

> learned, and consequently the last 50 years have seen an explosion of interest in clown training worldwide (Davison, 2013:134).

In this section I shall examine two opposing clown teachers and their radically different philosophies concerning how to prepare/train the clown. I shall also attempt to demonstrate how each individual philosophy is deeply embedded in either radical spontaneity or radical structure and, as a result, becomes limiting for the clown actor if worked with in isolation.

Many argue that the recent popularity of new clown courses goes hand in hand with the significant interest in ideas around play that have become synonymous with, and integral to, clown and acting teaching. Two major practitioners who incorporated play as part of their teaching methods, and influenced clown teachers like Gaulier, are Jacques Copeau and Jacques Lecoq, both of whom had an individual understanding and application of the term play. "Copeau, Lecoq and Gaulier opened up the notion of the theatre clown ... to confront us with a radical level of play that's capable of subverting everything we hold dear in established theatre practice" (Wright, 2006:183).

Phillipe Gaulier: The Auguste Clown

For the purpose of this dissertation, I shall not delve too deeply into the complexities of different types of playing or play theory, but rather focus on the particular approach to play of Lecoq's former student, Phillipe Gaulier, the most widely acclaimed and often cited living clown 'master', whose month long *Clown* and *Le Jeu* course I attended in June 2014. Kendrick offers a possible explanation for the widespread notion of play integral to Gaulier's clown philosophy:

> Gaulier's techniques also emerge in UK university drama programs and have even influenced actor training. This is because his technique appears readily attainable, as it is based entirely on play. Everyone can play. Everyone knows how to play. It is an accessible activity, which does not appear to require any specialist skill or acting technique. Play is immediate, its results can be instantaneous and performance can easily be conjured from

> the playful engagement in a game in a fraction of the time that more complex actor training techniques demand (Kendrick, 2011:73).

Gaulier has provided us with a hermetic and radical clowning philosophy based on play, which, I propose, accurately captures and explores the characteristics of a modern Auguste clown. The pedagogue's unique method of teaching play *(Le Jeu)* through extreme provocation will be discussed by connecting play to authenticity and failure and by looking at how play is managed through elements of pleasure and lightness. I use these factors to illustrate, I argue, characteristics of the modern Auguste clown. I shall incorporate examples from Philippe Gaulier's book, *The Tormentor,* as well as my own-recorded experience to support my claims. As the history of the Auguste clown seems to evade being harnessed to factual records, analysis of Gaulier's techniques and philosophies has often been frowned upon and those who have tried to decode Gaulier's teaching style, have often been disregarded. Amsden insists that Gaulier, Pagneux[2] and Lecoq, ''would strenuously deny that their teaching practice represents a 'method' [...]. [O]ne might also note a shared skepticism about the ability of academic writing to capture and communicate any lived sense of their pedagogy: its aims, strategies, inflections and underlying dynamics" (Amsden, 2011:13).

Everything about *Ecolé Phillipe Gaulier* is shrouded in a mystical and cult-like veil, from the website, to the old town Étampes in France in which the school is based (often referred to as 'little Venice'). As with most of the contemporary clown schools, no previous qualifications are required to attend and it is open to anyone at any level of experience. Below is an extract from the official website of the school:

> The theories on the theatre of J. Lecoq focused on the idea of movement, the thoughts of the young rebel P. Gaulier were based around Le Jeu: the games which nature,

[2] Monika Pagneux is renowned for her influence on movement within a theatre realm studying and working with practitioners including Jacques Lecoq and Peter Brooke.

> animals and humans organize. Games as full of life as breathing or the beating of the heart, which record in our imagination the movements of a life to come. Indeed, later, the games of childhood will lighten the weight of sorrows. They will colour them with an ethereal wash, an elixir that specializes on laughter called 'humour'. Philippe Gaulier teaches Le Jeu, the pleasure it engenders and the imaginary world it unveils; bang, bang, just like that. Actors are always beautiful when you can see, around the characters, their souls at play, opening the door of the imaginary world. (Gaulier, 2014)

The above extract gives an indication of Gaulier's approach to clown teaching. In all his writing and interviews there is a storytelling, imaginative and escapist tone in how he describes theories and perspectives. This passage highlights some underlying issues and contradictions that I would like to extract in order to move forward in understanding and analysing the basis of Gaulier's clown training.

There are two important issues that can be emphasised from this seemingly elusive description of the school. Firstly, the focus on play *(Le Jeu);* secondly, the idea of the instantaneous, the "bang, bang, just like that". Gaulier's process is heuristic and he proposes that through play one instantaneously 'finds' one's clown with a sense of ease and simplicity; that it cannot be taught through technicalities and explanations but that it is a personal journey consisting of an embodied and unique experience for each individual.

For the first class Gaulier arrives with his drum and there is no introduction: he asks you to stand up and say whether you are "very funny, medium funny or not at all funny". From the first moment, the class is conducted with very little explanation of, or introduction to, any of his games and theories and there is a sense that you are involved in one long game in which you are not made aware of the rules. This in itself is uncommon as time is usually taken to explain the rules of a game along with the aims and expectations before the players are asked to participate. in Gaulier's philosophy of clowning, the rules are not as important as the *struggle* to understand the rules in order to keep up. It is this 'struggle' that Gaulier

invites and encourages. This comes with the territory of being constantly confused and "in the shit"[3], in a state where you can easily be provoked.

Gaulier's primary teaching method pertaining to the Auguste clown is instilling a sense of actual failure in the student. In other words, as much as he lays emphasis on the idea of playing and imagining, when it comes to failure and the flop, he provokes the student in any way possible - through personal insults, swearing, brutality and mocking - until there is a 'real' response and sense of failure experienced. Weitz states that: "It remains apparent, though, that the prototypical clowning engine, derived from Western origins in the naïve or simple country bumpkin, is fuelled by culturally sponsored conceits about physical, intellectual and social incompetence" (2012:79). The first time an Auguste entered the stage he was failing at whatever he was supposed to be doing and thereby succeeded in making the audience laugh, which is, Gaulier would argue, the only job the clown has. Because of the 'success' of this failure of the Auguste it was decided that the clown should practice how to fail better.

It has become apparent that no discussion on failure can commence without it being closely tied to a discussion about ideas around the real and authentic, as opposed to notions of fakeness and artificiality. In other words, can a clown practice how to fail, or is it 'true' failure and vulnerability that creates entertainment? Gaulier's two hours of teaching is divided into two parts. In the first section we play games in which he instills the feeling of failure. The second part consists of students working in pairs or alone, in front of the rest of the students, 'feeling the flop' and working with Gaulier as provocateur. The idea of the flop

[3] This term was coined originally by Gaulier himself, to refer to a state where the clown fails in making the audience laugh and needs to find a way of 'rescuing himself' by causing laughter. Subsequently, it has become widespread and used by many clown schools and authors. Throughout, this paper I will refer to the state after the flop as 'being in the shit'.

and one of the games played every day to induce it will now be discussed to demonstrate how failure is provoked through playing.

The game 'Samuel Says' does not differ much from the 'Simon Says' game that is often played in nursery schools. The teacher shouts out a command, e.g. "Simon says, put your hands on your head", and the students obey. If the teacher says "jump up and down" without saying "Simon says" you carry on with the previous command until you hear "Simon says". In this game, however, after issuing a few commands and seeing people make mistakes, Gaulier stops the action and sternly asks the group: "Who has made mistakes during the game?" The students who have made mistakes then put up their hands and explain their mistakes; e.g. "I made a mistake when you said jump up and down". As a punishment for your mistakes Gaulier orders you to give kisses to the other participants. Gaulier awards kisses as punishment and it is up to the student to decide how many of the 'punishment kisses' s/he is willing to accept. For example, if a student is given ten kisses as punishment he gets to decide - "depending on how his body feels" - how many kisses he is going to ask for. The person who you approach and beg a kiss from then has a choice to let you give them a kiss or not. If you get the kisses you needed, you have succeeded and everyone cheers and if you do not, you have failed and need to go to Gaulier for 'torturing'[4].

I was swept into the game for the first time, not understanding, and of course, like anyone attending a course for the first time, I was trying to get it 'right', trying not to make mistakes and concentrating on 'understanding' the game instead of just playing. After a while, I looked around and noticed the immense 'fun' that was to be had by making mistakes and the fantastic opportunities the mistakes and 'failure to get it right' provided. I

[4] Torturing is inflicted by Gaulier himself and entails physical torment. Gaulier pushes you forward into an uncomfortable position, he then locks your arm behind your back and bends your fingers towards the palm of your hand, and then finally he pretends to chop off your head.

understood for the first time the 'pleasure' Gaulier often refers to. When the time came to confess the mistakes or someone was called out, their response would be something like this: "Oh no, Monsieur Gaulier, please, please forgive me, my head was just thinking about the lovely lunch I just had and I struggled to think about jumping up and down"; or "Gaulier I will not take my punishment, because Sarah came right in front of me to trick me, she has done it before and it's all because she is mean and jealous of me for getting it right. She is a trickster Gaulier, have you not noticed?" The whole class would then pick up on the game of 'Sarah the trickster' and loudly chant running in circles around the victim. The possibility of action changing all the time without rules to weigh it down might be one way to understand the 'lightness' that is often associated with this type of playing. Gaulier might just 'believe' the student and start to give Sarah the trickster a far worse time so that she then gets the opportunity to be vulnerable and to 'play'. This pleasure taken in lying, blaming others, cheating, playing dumb or feeling sorry for yourself, is at the core of the game and of 'finding your clown' not as something you need to 'figure out' or understand cognitively but as a childlike game which relies on intuition, pleasure and lightness. In this space where there are no rules but rather a spirit of anarchy, where anything can happen, things *do* seem to happen. Failure to abide by the rules means a chance to succeed by causing laughter. Additionally, having to beg for kisses and being dependent on them to 'survive' the game, provides the opportunity to learn how to 'play' the audience. As with being dependent on the audience for laughs, one cannot force anyone to allow you to kiss them, but you are allowed a chance to manipulate, beg or try anything to get a kiss, and yet it is still up to the other person to say yes or no. You form an exchange with one person and through rhythm and intuition you are either rejected or allowed to keep playing.

The second leg of Gaulier's teaching is a type of dialogue that happens between the student working on the floor and the teacher/provocateur and the audience of other students. The student goes on stage when s/he chooses to, usually with no particular task (other than making the audience laugh, sometimes with a task as arbitrary as 'be a washing machine'). The student is expected to work with 'Mr Flop', which is failure to make the audience laugh, and works in the following way. The clown/performer enters the stage expecting a laugh. If the audience does laugh the clown has succeeded and needs to keep them laughing by repeating the action or adding to the material until they stop laughing. However, if after a few seconds they do not laugh (the more probable outcome), the clown needs to recognise the flop (Mr. Flop) and actively welcome it by responding accordingly. If this flop is recognised the audience will laugh and the clown will have recognised and worked with the vulnerability of not being funny. As Davison eloquently explains:

> Clown presence depends on failure. It is through the clown's inability to convince us, and his or her admission of that fact, that the spectator is led to 'believe'. The failure to convince, 'the flop', could thus be seen as a kind of absence: the absence of success. Thus we could say that the clown achieves presence (believability) by admitting his or her absence (failure to convince). In other words, in clowning we do not need to fret about the difficulty of being fully present, or the ideological impossibility of fullness. Clowns escape the actor's problem of having to pretend that what they're doing is 'really real'. (Davison, 2013:207)

Gaulier firmly believes that it is this authentic feeling and recognition of absolute vulnerability, of standing in front of a group of strangers, exposed to the reality that you have failed at a task (having to make people laugh), and that it cannot be achieved, that leads to the clown being 'found' (a term often used in relation to clowning). That somehow if this desperate moment can be recognised and more importantly, admitted to the audience, the performer becomes a clown. Herein lies the connection to 'authenticity' as many believe this moment of recognising the flop to be non-repeatable. "Failure may be identified

through both scripted and non-scripted acts, which is to claim that despite our tendency to believe in its once off authenticity, the failed moment or event is not necessarily improvised" (2013:209). Bailes similarly suggests that: "The manipulation of failure is a learnable technique, though admittedly a subtle one" (2011:14).

Gaulier only teaches for two hours a day and the entire two hours is filled with games similar to the one explained above. In Gaulier's class there is no attention given to engaging with the body of the clown or to any 'serious discussion' or reflection. Strangely enough, there is also a two hour 'movement class' taught by another teacher (a different one almost every time) that feels disconnected from anything Gaulier teaches and as he admits: "As a child I never liked Gymnastics, nor movement, nor teachers of gymnastics, nor teachers of movement" (Gaulier, 2007:235). In other words, Gaulier's method relies exclusively on playing spontaneously and freely and if it is not intuitively understood/learnt by the student in this way, there is no alternative provided to understand, practice or work with the clown. Gaulier does not provide any access to a logical or cognitive engagement with what is happening mechanically with the clown's mind, body, relationship to other clowns or relationship to the space and audience.

If there is a possibility that playing games is the only requirement for creating a clown, I could not help but question whether there should not be more clarification and understanding of how these games operate mechanically. Playing the games on my return I also realised the impact Gaulier had as provocateur and how within games, where the Auguste is in charge, the presence of a Whiteface with regards to rules, tension and goals is essential.

> Play happens within certain limits of time and place, and within those limits it has its own course and meaning. Huizinga tells us play creates order and is order; play has rules that determine the order of the temporary world circumscribed by play; play contains an

> element of tension involving something to be achieved; and play moves toward ending that tension. (Huizinga cited by Danzig, 2007:83)

I question whether these games could be adequately taken from Gaulier and practiced/taught meaningfully by anyone else. Although I am able to reflect back on the games and make meaning by guessing and interpreting what these games may open up, it seems as though, without any explanation or introduction, they are likely to be watered down when passed on, especially because Gaulier's provocation is what (in most games) initiates and advances the action. Lynne Kendrick, who also attended Gaulier's school, attempts to analyse Gaulier's games and also appears to share my view. She questions the limited information and research available in the field: "there is little to no research into how play functions, in the training for, and therefore the construction of, an acted performance. Such lack of practical analysis has come to the attention of play theorists" (Kendrick, 2011:73).

When the course drew to an end, I came home with many more questions than I had left with. I tried to look at the games we played to find a residue; something I could apply to my own work as theatre maker, but I struggled. On the last day when I went to ask Gaulier something about one of the games and how it is meant to be played, he answered: "You do not need to understand it in order to play, you think too much, you cannot be a clown if you think so much". There was something in that comment that I felt indicated a problematic issue not only in Gaulier's course but in the general way we have come to think (or rather not think) about the clown. In my view, the notion or myth that clown performance is something that simply needs to be 'found' by playing games is challenging. It seems as though this view has become a popular one when looking at the descriptions of clown courses and how they promote the ease of 'finding your clown'. Many students writing

about Gaulier have commented on his brutally honest and harsh way of engaging with his students. His mocking, exposing and victimising allows for an 'authentic' response and vulnerability from the student that is, it is argued, a crucial strategy to break down the students' egos and their need to be in control and opens them up to exposing their vulnerability. In the next section I will discuss my own grappling with the Auguste principles advocated by Gaulier to try and demonstrate how, by worshipping the drunk and clumsy Auguste, and sidelining the more rule-based and structured Whiteface, we have been brought to a place where we are unable to engage in a progressive and critical conversation about the clown.

Ira Seidenstein: The Whiteface Clown

> Davison notices a trend in clown teaching to focus on Auguste clowns but that, away from the classroom, "The white clown's contemporary absence has left the Auguste alone and inexplicable without her partner" (Amsden, 2011:63).

In the aftermath of Gaulier's course, many discussions around my research have been focused on the likelihood of finding a sustainable way to practice clowning in the absence of an audience or teacher who could act as provocateur or indicate by laughing in approval whether you are on the right track. Whilst researching, I came across Ira Seidenstein's website with the following description which led me to look further into his clowning philosophy and to attend his course in April 2015. "I have devised a clear, linear and adaptable method for clowns to train daily similar to the way a dancer, musician or artist practices or trains" (Seidenstein, 2010:n.p.).

Seidenstein, unlike most clown teachers, underwent many years of formal movement training (Suzuki, Yoga, Clown and Acrobatics), as well as a longstanding academic/teaching career in Australia where he was awarded both a Masters and Doctoral degree in actor and

clown teaching. He created an method (The Seidenstein Method) that he maintains is a simple and realistic way to train on a daily basis to keep the clown or even an actor 'performance fit'. Seidenstein teaches 'exercises' instead of 'games' and his training philosophy is focused and disciplined with attention to detail, limits, rules and hours of preparation and training. He explains:

> Many physical theatre courses fail to provide a suitable course in the history of theatre or the genealogy of embodied practices for acting, and they also fail to provide even a single clear, structured, and scientifically based physical discipline. In other words, intellectually and practically, the learners are left to their own devices and will in most cases simply attempt to reinvent what has already been more highly developed elsewhere. (Seidenstein, 2009:48)

I shall now look at parts of the "clear, structured and scientifically based" method he envisions by considering a few exercises as well as the manner in which he teaches them.

Firstly, it is important to notice that Seidenstein has a particular preoccupation with 'time', often emphasising the necessity for taking enough time every day for practice. Even his exercises in class are taught slowly and meticulously which is in stark opposition to the "bang, bang, just like that" of Gaulier. Seidenstein's approach is not based on making the audience laugh as a primary concern and he explains that the laughter of the audience will follow (if that is the aim), once the student is connected to his/her body and knows where s/he is in space. His exercises are designed to make the clown feel secure and confident rather than vulnerable and he argues that it is a sense of connectedness to the body and awareness of how the body works in space (mechanically) that will lead to successful clowning. This awakening of the body, integrated with creativity and concentration, he suggests, can be practiced before a performance and encourages the clown to feel confident and to take risks during performances.

We began the class each day with an hour of intensive movement work based on yoga and Suzuki principles. Seidenstein is strict on the details of each exercise and walks around observing and correcting the students. Thereafter, he would provide us with creative 'exercises' to do individually and took time to explain and demonstrate them in detail. An example of a typical exercise would be the 'nothing exercise': you walk slowly to the other side of the room, holding your arms up in front of you, on each step moving your arms to a different position until you reach the end of the room where you pause with your arms in an arbitrary position. From there you use whatever impulse is prompted by your physical position (especially your arms) to give you the beginning of an action, e.g. blowing your nose. To this you then add voice and exaggerate the action repeatedly ultimately finding a rhythm. When two clowns do this in pairs, it becomes one way to start a clown scene using the impulse of the body. Thereafter, we worked individually going up onto the floor with Seidenstein and the rest of the class as spectators. Once again he gives a simple task with a few guidelines. "I have found it most useful to place some specific limit by providing the learner [with] a time frame, combined with, a title for the assignment, without dictating a theme, style, or approach. I would make a variety of elements acceptable for each assignment" (Seidenstein, 2009:96). In one exercise, for example, the audience watches as you walk to the corner of the room, put on your clown nose and hat in the corner facing the wall and slowly turn around revealing yourself to the audience. The words: "I should" are then said followed by "Oh I can't". There is nothing complex about the exercise instructions and within the structure you are given the freedom to do it in any way you like, for example with any persona, voice or with any chosen movement. However, Seidenstein is adamant that you should pay attention to the detail of the words and not leave out, repeat or change any of the words (not even the *Oh*) as these phrases offer a valuable rhythm and impetus

from which to work that can be traced to historic clown scenes and rhythms used in the circus. In addition, while the student is on the floor working, Seidenstein is extremely focused and observant of every moment and engages in, what he refers to as 'side-coaching'. In his PhD thesis, *From the Liminal to the Visceral*, he explains:

> Side-coaching was established and written about by Viola Spolin […]. This is the process when a teacher or director coaches an actor while the actor is actually in action. It is common that after a scene rehearsal that an actor receives notes. Side-coaching assists the actor to embody the outside suggestions immediately in action. This is similar to coaching an athlete for example when a coach walks on the pool's rim while calling instructions to the swimmer in the water. (Seidenstein, 2009:98)

While on the floor, it does feel a bit like having a sports coach in the room as Seidenstein actively and loudly comments and continuously assists you to find a rhythm or connectedness in your body by asking you to make alterations in the moment. Seidenstein's comments would often be something like: "where are your knees?" or "don't drop your arms" or "repeat what you just did". In this way, you are not asked to sit down when you are unable to make the audience laugh but rather 'coached' through these moments of failure into understanding how they work technically and in what way the failure could be transformed into success by using technical tools, such as (among others), changing direction, repetition, paying attention to your position in space. This is rewarding for the performer who learns the way out of being stuck or 'in the shit' by making sense of the failure.

Let me describe an exercise to demonstrate how a student can be guided through the flop and respond without having to necessarily feel vulnerable. Again, the issue remains whether or not the performance may be deemed 'authentic' if the clown does not actually feel the vulnerability. '*Clown ex nihlo'* is a very simple exercise which means to 'clown from nothing'. Two clowns enter the space, lift their hands and begin an action. After a few

moments, they notice each other and respond to one another in order to form a clown scene/improvisation. For example, in one particular scene, Clown A starts sweeping while B works out mathematics. Clown A shouts something and hands Clown B an imaginary broom, however she does it so quickly that Clown B does not see it although the audience does. Momentarily we are all in a crisis and there is a flop. Clown A stops and looks at the audience with a sense of panic. She cannot hand B another broom because there was only one broom and she is not sure what to do. Clown B looks around not understanding what happened and the scene starts to slip. At this moment Seidenstein shouts to Clown A: "Find a broom" and Clown A pushes Clown B onto his knees and makes him the broom. The audience laughs, not only because of the originality of the idea, but also because of the problem the clown has just solved in front of us. After the fear has turned to laughter there is no stopping the clowns; the scene continues, each moment becoming more bizarre and ridiculous, with clown B being turned into a window cleaner and then a washing machine, but we, as audience, can follow the clowns because we trust that whatever 'flop' occurs it will be solved. It was so funny that Seidenstein asked them to repeat it a few days later. As we might have expected, the 'magic' was gone and they simply did what they knew worked before without the joy of finding new games and relationships. Seidenstein explained that in clown theatre it is very rare for clowns to be completely spontaneous in an actual performance, and that this is not expected. However, that being said, while the clown has to use what s/he has prepared, to give him/her the confidence of the Whiteface with his/her bag of tricks, the clown cannot depend on it. The clown must simultaneously be prepared to take risks and look to find the spontaneity on stage, meeting the Auguste head on, and searching for complicity with the audience.

On the last day of the course we all performed in a theatre and showcased some of the material we had worked on during the course. Much of the spontaneity and pleasure that went into the work that I saw on stage was lost once again without the assistance of Seidenstein's side coaching. I remembered a conversation I had with a professional and successful clown I met at Gaulier in which he told me that no one can teach you clown and that it is simply something you need to find your own way into 'understanding' and working with. One of the problems with the way in which Seidenstein teaches in comparison to Gaulier's method, is that it is easier to 'understand' which means that you think because you 'understand' what he is teaching and telling you, you are able to apply it. However you then quickly find yourself relying on his side-coaching just as much as you have on Gaulier's provocation.

Interrogating the two disparate ways of teaching clown has given me the opportunity to confront two distinct ways of thinking about clowning and some of its most significant elements. After having had the opportunity to explain Seidenstein's way of working, we can tie some loose strings together by returning to the idea of preparation, authenticity and success relating to the Whiteface. The Whiteface clown in the circus is traditionally prepared to make the audience laugh by confidently outwitting them through prepared and practiced tricks, gags and skills such as juggling and acrobatics. I realised after returning from the second course that the two courses were not so different in their aims (ultimately aiming to create a fresh, spontaneous and playful connection between clown and audience) but rather that their way of approaching this goal differed radically. In a sense they both also rely on searching for the 'authentic', Gaulier by 'tormenting' the students into the confused and puzzled state of the Auguste who can respond out of authentic vulnerability, and Seidenstein

who works towards finding a disciplined way of trusting in mechanical impulses that derive from the body which can then be integrated to result in creativity and confidence.

CHAPTER THREE:

The Whiteface and Auguste in Performance

At the beginning of this dissertation I articulated the frequent challenges facing the student attempting to connect theory and practice with respect to clowning, as well as the absence of a theoretical structure recorded and investigated by clowns themselves. The biggest difficulty in documenting performance lies in the fact that the performer is trained to remain completely immersed in the moment and therefore struggles to maintain an analytical distance from the performance that is always to an extent, "chaotic and riotous" as previously stated by Zimmerman (cited in Danzig, 2007: 30-1). To assist me with the demanding process of reflecting on the intangible moments of exchange between audience and performer, I have extensively recorded the feedback from audience members during the discussions that followed each of the performance projects that made up my research. To assist with my own experiences, I kept a journal, highlighting certain personal challenges and observations.

In this final chapter the focus shifts to structure and spontaneity in performance by looking specifically at the structure that is provided by the theatre space. In addition, I engage with 'ritual' as underpinning clown theatre performances today. My performance projects of the last two years are presented as case studies to support my argument that structure and spontaneity, as captured in the partnership of the Whiteface and Auguste clowns and their respective personae, are fundamental concepts to consider when making clown theatre. I rely extensively on Danzig and her research around her own clown company, *500 Clown*, which she directs.

I will begin with a description of 'disruption', which according to Danzig and McManus, is the central performance tool in clown theatre:

> Donald McManus, in his study of clown as protagonist in modernist theatre, proposes that disruption is the primary device that allows the clown to occupy its typical insider/outsider position. McManus identifies two sites of disruption: theatrical conventions and fictional worlds. The former refers to "[...] rules of performance, governing the mimetic conventions being used," and the latter refers to "[...] social rules, governing the cultural norms of the world being imitated on stage". In other words, the norms of theatre are one target of disruption, for example breaking the fourth wall, exposing the stage manager, exposing a wall that is a painted canvas. The other target is the integrity of the fictional world of which the clown character is part. Referring to these two sites of disruption, "[t]he two phenomena affect each other because disruption of the mimetic conventions usually implies disruption of cultural norms, and the clown's difficulty with the cultural norm often leads to his disrupting the mimetic convention". (McManus, 2003 quoted by Danzig, 2007:147)

Disruption, as discussed by MacManus and reintroduced by Danzig in this useful passage, constructively formulates and clarifies what I deem to be the essence of clown performance in the theatre and further reiterates that disruption driven by impulse and spontaneity, occurs best within structure and an established form. Disruption is defined by the *Cambridge Online Dictionary* as: "prevent[ing] something especially a system, process, or event, from continuing as usual or as expected".

The first site of disruption identified by McManus (in Danzig, 2007), as transpiring through the "rules of performance governing the mimetic conventions being used" is imbedded in the physical structure of the theatre, epitomised in the proscenium arch, which was built for the purpose of advancing theatrical conventions of mimesis.

> In the performance of a traditional realist, three-act play in a proscenium arch theatre, for example, most theatre-goers will take for granted that a ''fourth wall'' is assumed by the actors and spectators alike. The actors consciously ignore the presence of the audience as if they were not there, which, paradoxically reasserts the knowledge of their presence (disavowal is a basic premise that enables theatre); the lights, costumes, set, music and so on serve to buttress the illusion of a self-contained world upon the stage in which the actors feign oblivion of the contents and activities of the word beyond the stage , whilst the audience willingly colludes with that pretence.

> Relatively speaking this economy is closed, hermetic and strives to achieve coherence. (Bailes, 2011:14)

Therefore, the shift of clowns from the open circular space of the circus ring towards this, 'hermetic' theatre space is worthy of close consideration. The most important difference between the circus space and the theatre space lies not only in the different spatial arrangements but more importantly in the proxemics that are implicit in how these arrangements are negotiated between performer and spectator. Miller argues that, "It is reasonable to ask a member of the audience seated in Row E how far he or she was from Laurence Oliver playing Othello. But there is no answer to the question how far he or she was from the Moor or Desdemona" (1986:61). This remark helps us to understand that it is not about the actual distance in metres between audience and actors, but rather about proximity and how the space is physically, emotionally and symbolically structured which significantly influences the dynamics and experience of theatre.

To explain this, Miller makes the distinction between "fences" and "frames" (1986:61). "Mechanical fences" are used in situations where there exists a 'real' threat to the audience, even though this threat might also be staged as an illusion, i.e incorporating acts that use fire, animals or trapeze artists to invoke a sense of risk in the spectator. Miller gives the example of a lion in the circus where a physical barrier is provided to protect the audience, and this becomes proof of the actuality of the event. Frames however are often symbolic and subtler than 'fences'. They are generated by devices such as the drawn curtain, or the artificial light on actors as opposed to the darkness within which the audience is hidden. These divides make distinctions between 'real life' and the 'represented life' being displayed on stage (Miller, 1986:61).

The circular circus tent encourages spectators to feel immersed within the experience; immersion is emphasised by the fluidity of the 'frames' or barriers between spectator and performer. The spatial relations leave space for movement and surprise; spectators are often asked to enter the ring and performers, especially clowns, frequently move in and amongst spectators. In addition, the circus etiquette is more flexible and accommodating to families and children, with spectators sometimes moving in and out of the tent during performances. Spectators are also encouraged to interact with the performers and sometimes circus animals before and after the show.

The interaction between performers and audience members in conventional theatre spaces, on the other hand, is either very limited or non-existent. Samuel Weber alerts the reader's attention to the terms 'theatre' and 'theatricality' and asserts that the same etymological root - the Greek word *thea* - which connotes to "a place from which to observe or to see" applies to both theatre and theory (2004:3). Weber clarifies the manner in which the "privileging of sight" over the other senses, especially hearing, illustrates how the viewer /audience seeks to "secure a position" remaining at a distance from the object in order to make meaning of what is being seen, rather than being contained within the experience (2004:3). Additionally, it is not conventional for the performers to be seen in costume before the show as it disrupts the sense of illusion and theatre audiences are usually expected to play a miniscule role in the exchange between audience and actor: "It is hard to understand the true function of the spectator, there and not there, ignored and yet needed. The actor's work is never for an audience, yet it always is for one" (Brook, 2008:57).

It is therefore reasonable to interrogate the clown's shift from the open and participatory circus and street space, to the more formal and regulated theatre space (bearing in mind that this is not the only spatial shift and clowns have moved between

spaces and contexts throughout history). Many have reasoned that the move to the theatre was primarily due to the birth of the Auguste and the subsequent focus on the relationship between clowns who were then able to sustain a whole hour of performance (e.g. Townsen, 1976; Davison, 2013). A further contributing factor is the fact that the theatre offers the clown a secure structure and conventions against which to react. Although it could be argued that there are also implicit conventions within the circus and a 'contract' set up between performers and spectators, the theatre, and the formality of the role of the audience in the theatre, arguably offers clowns an even stronger authority against which to react.

> [A] significant tension emerges when clown casts theater as an authority figure. Clown exists in relation to authority […]. 500 Clown, which creates productions to be seen in theaters, has found that theater itself provides a rich and multi-dimensional authority for the clown. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that popular cultural knowledge of theater provides that authority. (Danzig, 2007:19)

In my practical research, I experimented with three radically different levels of proxemics and engagement between clown actor and the audience, relying not only on the physical space divide but also on negotiating audience expectations. I will use the feedback I received from the audience as well as my own experience as performer to draw certain conclusions that inform my ongoing research and practice. In each performance I used 'incompetence' as a point of departure from which content could be created.

The first showcase, the minor project, consisted of a short twenty-minute performance in which I performed outside of the theatre, in an open space in the corner of a courtyard in the absence of any of the rules and regulations that the theatre proffers. The main purpose at the time was to investigate where audience members would locate themselves in relation to the clown action, as there was no agreed indication of where the

performance space began and ended. I set it up so that the audience was queuing outside the theatre expecting the show to be inside. While they were waiting, I appeared, attempting to hang a giant plastic bag from a wall. I established a situation where it seemed as if I was in desperate need of help from the audience in order for the show to continue and called audience members to assist me while frantically explaining why the performance was a failure. Weitz explains the role of the clown theatre audience as follows: "The performance relationship is by nature fragile, with the spectator asked not simply to watch, process, understand and feel but to take active part through repeated eruptions of a quasi-involuntary response based on the deft manipulation of expectation and surprise" (2012:82). He later adds that these "eruptions may in fact dispense with customary fourth-wall niceties and pose a palpable threat to private spaces" (2012:83).

In a discussion that directly followed the performance, I questioned the audience about their experience as spectators. Most audience members responded similarly in that, although they found it intriguing and "very funny" at times, many commented that the performance was not sustainable and felt "loose" and "unstructured"; someone commenting that it bothered her that she "did not know what she was watching" (Journal notes, 2015). I questioned whether the performance could be defined as 'clown theatre' as it was not in a theatre and had very little structure. In some ways it was unsustainable and closer to a small repeatable *entrée* performed at a festival, where passersby could stop and watch for a while and and then move on. However, this might also be because the function and the scope of the minor project was to present a small snippet for exploratory purposes and not an entire performance. Reflecting back, it may be argued that there was a structuring device created through an interplay of 'expectation' and 'surprise'. As Weitz

argues: “Clown rhythms rely on an orchestration of expectation and surprise enhanced by the fact that we can never be quite sure what the rules or possibilities are” (Weitz, 2012:82). In other words, the expectation was created by the fact that the audience thought they were going into a theatre, and surprise by the fact that the audience never actually entered the theatre and the performance happened in the courtyard instead.

The context also plays a role in ‘orchestrating’ expectation and surprise. In the academic environment experimenting with conventions is expected and the audience consists mostly of staff members and other drama students. In any other environment where audience members are more invested in their own experience, and have, for example, paid for a ticket, expectation and surprise might not be as easily orchestrated or accepted. Additionally, as a performer it was very difficult to perform confidently without the structure of the theatre space, a narrative structure or a clear script. Although I could use the freedom to play and ‘feel the flop’ I often found myself wondering where to go next or how to end the show which is exactly what the Auguste opposes. I realised through this project that perhaps the Auguste could perform alone in this way at festivals (or any more informal space) where incompetence is explored physically or through script or with props for passersby who could choose to watch for however long it remains entertaining, but once again, for the theatre, without the Whiteface partner, the clown feels lost and the action feels arbitrary.The freedom the Auguste seeks becomes difficult to enjoy when s/he needs to worry about keeping a structure in place. Playing in a theatre therefore also provides the Auguste with the sense of a structure and authority against which to react, as Danzig articulates when discussing her own company’s work:

> 500 Clown needs there to be expectations so that when the audience is invited to break expectations (or when 500 Clown breaks expectations by asking the audience to play) there is a consequence of tension, laughter, surprise – drama! We do our shows in

> theaters. We use the confines of the theater – all those conventions; it's the cultural context of what we do, which is why it's hard for us to do what we do in an open setting. (Danzig, 2007:138)

My second project, the medium project, was larger in scope with a performance duration of at least thirty-minutes. I had, by this time, recognised the value of performing in a theatre venue and I used the physical space as a point of departure. The performance was devised in two clear parts: a set up, Whiteface, structured and prepared performance by four performers; and a completely spontaneous disruptive, Auguste performance by me as an audience member sitting amongst the audience in the auditorium. The performance started with me watching the show as the director, creating the expectation that the 'performance' would continue on stage as a 'high art' Masters performance that I had directed and prepared. Then, as the show progressed, I slowly and subtly disrupted the action from my seat with the clown action of a typical incompetent audience member, coughing, looking for things in my bag and allowing my phone to ring. This action was mostly spontaneous and I reacted to the audience members around me with no prepared script. Slowly the focus shifted from the stage to the audience with the performance ultimately happening in the audience. My aim was to take it further by instructing audience members to engage with the action happening on stage and eventually to move most of the audience on stage and have the performers sit down in the seats.

This performance was possibly the most insightful and valuable learning experience. Analysing the digital recording afterwards and reflecting on the performance, the notion of Whiteface and Auguste as a partnership started to make more sense to me. I realised that it was not just that the essence of both clown types was present in the performance, but what was important was the manner in which they interacted and reacted to each other within

the relationship. Most importantly, one clown performer needs to be in control of driving the narrative forward and the other of disrupting the narrative. Davison conveys this clearly:

> The clown [referring to the Whiteface clown] inhabits the fictional world that he is creating or trying to create for his audience. The Auguste on the other hand does not set out with any objective. He is purely reactive, and his reactions are not compatible with the fiction the clown is trying to create. The Auguste therefore remains outside the narrative. (Davison, 2013:92)

Therefore, in my medium project, I was trying to play the Whiteface by keeping the structure together and controlling the performance I had created on stage as well as trying to react to it spontaneously. I realised through this performance that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to be the 'the boss' and 'the idiot' at the same time whilst trying to be spontaneous. Rémy refers to this as the eccentric who is "at the same time the author and the actor of the comic poem that he encompasses and exposes" (Rémy cited in Davison, 2013:293). If, for example, in this performance I had had a script or a clear structure that was strong enough to fall back on in between the disruptions, I would have been more free and confident to play spontaneously.

Danzig explains her company's use of text as a structure and Whiteface counterpart for the Auguste clowns. *500 Clown* relies on a strong narrative structure to represent the Whiteface clown, where well-known texts such as Frankenstein and Macbeth are performed by clowns who constantly reinterpret and disrupt the structure set up by the text that is known to the audience. Therefore the text becomes a platform that drives the action forward while making it repeatable even though it is constantly disrupted. The relationship between the text and the performers is clear, and the text becomes the authority, something the clowns need to constantly refer and return to. "Without a well-known source text, there would be no expectations or at least not enough to sustain a full-length

performance of disruptive play" (Danzig, 2007:148). She later recalls a performance where a source text was not used and explains the effect being that, "the clowns' attention to the present moment did not create disruptions because there was no through-line to be disrupted. The production as a whole therefore lacked tension and drama, and was often meandering, unanchored and at its worst, indulgent" (Danzig 2007:151).

In my third performance project, we were given the task to create a one-person show that did not have to be driven exclusively by our theoretical research. In this performance, entitled *Paper Trail*, the engagement with the audience, although still present, was subtler and I used a prepared and well-structured text. I was prepared for one action/story leading to another and rehearsed it in order but I still altered and improvised the text and what had been rehearsed during the performance. I found that the pre-prepared material did not limit me, as I was confident about establishing complicity with my audience from the first moment I arrived on stage.

There was one moment where I felt I could feel the 'flop' and meet the Auguste clown through an imponderable disruption. I had created giant paper wings that were mounted on dowel sticks, and somewhere in the piece I sat on one of the sticks and it broke making a loud cracking sound. I uttered the word: "sorry" without thinking, breaking from the cheeky persona I was playing as the clown. In this moment the clown as insider and outsider became clear. This revealing of failure and authenticity as well as the recognition of the flop caused more laughs than any of the planned gags in the script, but the fact that the script existed and had been pre-prepared in rehearsal provided the background against which the spontaneous utterance could have its disruptive effect.

> The fictional world is not crafted to be a coherent entity out of which the clown can step. Rather than an inside/outside dichotomy, a more accurate dichotomy would be between predetermined course and presence in the moment. The former refers to that which is a

> planned series of actions, and the latter is the spontaneous impulse that pulls the clown off course. (Danzig, 2007:153)

In this solo performance, I explored with the Whiteface and Auguste becoming conceptual counterparts, each representing a different part of myself that then formed part of the content. Although this performance still allowed space for audience engagement it was more subtle and relied on my engaging through individual and collective eye contact or 'clocking'[5].

> The key to effective eye contact is using it to create relationship, a core element of clowning. In clown-theater, every time the clown looks at the audience, the clown must be ready and available to be affected. That contact invites involvement, communication, and cooperation. This quality of connection impacts what happens next, thereby allowing individual audience members to affect the course of the show. (Danzig, 2007:128)

From the feedback it was clear that of the three performances, the last was the most successful both in terms of audience enjoyment and my own experience as performer. I felt I was more confident to play spontaneously in each moment with an awareness of the audience. The structure of the script and theatre setting provided me with a trusted Whiteface structuring device that I was able to react to and divert from. However, this performance lacked some of the excitement of the anarchic and spontaneous clown and tended towards 'safety' almost verging on an ordinary theatrical one-person show where the clown is unable to change his own course. Therefore, the interplay between the Auguste and Whiteface is a careful balancing act that may also vary from performance to performance.

[5] Clocking, consistently used by clown teachers (Wright, Gaulier, Seidenstein) is described by John Wright as "looks of communication from performer to audience", the word deriving from "Cockney slang" meaning "face" (Wright, 2006: 77).

CONCLUSION

Reuniting the Whiteface And Auguste

The theory articulated in this explication will be reflected in a practical form in my final thesis production. In this performance I aim to use the accumulated experience and feedback from the previous three, radically different, performance pieces as well as my understanding (articulated in this paper) of how the clown operates in the theatre, to showcase a reconnection of the Whiteface and Auguste clowns. I will attempt to connect them in performance through:

- The role of ritual
- The Whiteface and Auguste and the respective characteristics they represent
- Preparation/Rehearsal, Improvisation and Spontaneity
- Using the Whiteface structure of the theatre as a structure against which the Auguste performers may subvert expectations

It is within ancient rituals that the earliest clowns were found. Ritual allows for the integration of Auguste and Whiteface spontaneity and structure on many levels. On the one hand, a ritual is understood in terms of structure, an authority that is established and abided by. On the other hand, ritual depends on the active role of participants in order for events to unfold. Although the ritual is usually planned carefully, it may at any time be disrupted by participants and so there is always a level of risk involved; it this risk upon which clowns thrive.

> The original impulse to clown is connected to our earliest and most basic customs. Among the Pueblo tribe of new Mexico that sustain the cultural lineage of our prehistoric ancestors, including the Hopi and the Zuni, clowns have long ridiculed and

> contradicted the serious ceremonies associated with worship and harvest, marriage and death. (LeBank & Bridal, 2015: 8-9)

Therefore, in my final performance I have constructed the performance frame around a simple ritual, a dinner party, wherein the audience participates in the role of guests as well as spectators. I will ensure a clear structure and aim to work carefully on the various means by which the structure will be maintained (rehearsals, the theatre structure and a basic set of actions) thereby insisting on the presence of the Whiteface. However, into this structure I will insert the Auguste and moments of spontaneity and playfulness with the potential to disrupt the pre-prepared structure. The role of the audience and their active participation will be included too. The audience is permitted to be present in the same playing space as the clown and, being within close proximity to the performance, becomes part of the action. The presence of the audience is consistently key to the development of the scene. This is in agreement with a description of the role of the audience Henri Blau describes as following:

> The audience … is not so much a mere congregation of people as a body of thought and desire. It does not exist before the play but is initiated or precipitated by it; it is not an entity to begin with but a consciousness constructed. The audience is what happens when, performing the signs and passwords of a play, something postulates itself and unfolds in response. (Blau cited by Danzig, 2007:144)

In the thesis production I aim to work with the cast in a rehearsal period, in which on the one hand clown action and skills will be learnt, and on the other, material generated for performance. By working through exercises and games gleaned from both courses I attended, I aim to combine aspects of both the Whiteface and the Auguste in the final performance.

Finally, to conclude, there is one essential aspect of clowning that I have been actively avoiding throughout this essay. However, for my argument to be substantial, this aspect cannot be omitted entirely. It cannot be denied that clowning has always been understood in relation to, as well as deeply situated in, the realms of the emotional and personal. Whether it is the idea of fear and a phobia that some have developed for clowns or the ecstatic joy and laughter with which many clowns are associated, personal/emotional involvement is a constant presence. Although I do not deny or wish to disregard my subjective position, throughout this paper I have tried to actively resist (as far as possible) an emotive and overly personal tone, as in my experience the field of clowning as it currently stands, is diminished and obscured by the dominance of the Auguste clown who I feel encapsulates these qualities. The Auguste, I have argued, has received too much power since the relegating of his Whiteface counterpart and the Auguste's veneration of the irrational, personal and rebellious cannot, as I have tried to demonstrate, work productively in furthering research into this field both practically and theoretically. What is required is the rediscovery of the Whiteface clown and its emphasis on rationality, structure and order. Therefore, although my work/material, will always be fundamentally personal, I have tried to work with the idea of exposing both the Whiteface clown that I personify through the persona of the perfectionist - the A-type who is concerned with progress, success and achievement - and the Auguste who is disorganised, embarrassing, late, forgetful and illogical.

In the discussion following our one person shows, the last comment given to me highlighted this issue. I was given the feedback that my persona as the Auguste, 'the young, cheeky and rebellious clown' (which is a persona and not a character), was unexpected next to my everyday Whiteface persona, which I also included in the performance through

recorded footage. There was a sense of freedom I found in giving my own Auguste space that helped me reignite the pleasure in performing. Therefore, although this dissertation has encouraged a re-introduction of the Whiteface clown to save the Auguste from failing to proceed, it is personally just as important for me to accept and trust my own Auguste clown, which is often, ironically, the most vulnerable and hidden part of myself.

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